

***IN THE PRISONS OF LEMBERG:  
ALEKSANDER MORGENBESSER AND JULIAN STRYJKOWSKI***

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The two texts here dealt with look very different one from the other, and the choice of comparing them may seem bizarre. They are a plain autobiographical story narrated by the Polish nobleman of Austrian descent Aleksander Morgenbesser (Jarosław 1816 - Czernowitz 1893) in his book *Wspomnienia z lwowskiego więzienia* (Memories of a Prison in Lemberg), written in 1885 and published only one hundred years later, in 1993<sup>1</sup>, and the novel *Czarna róża* (Black Rose) of 1962<sup>2</sup>, where the Polish-Jewish writer Julian Strykowski (Stryj 1905 - Warsaw 1996), then at the acme of his fame, describes, with the intermediation of a nearly autobiographical character, his own permanence at the Brygidki Prison, in the last years of the Second Polish Republic.

The two narration share anyhow several images and themes. The chronotope of prison, first of all, but also a very bright representation of the triangulation of desire – according to the scheme described by René Girard in his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*<sup>3</sup> – on the background of the triangulation of Galician society. *Galicja est omnis divisa in partes tres*, one could say, with a paraphrase of Julius Caesar. Divided among Poles, Jews and Ukrainians, located at the three peaks of the geometrical form of desire and exclusion; their complicated interaction sets a particular light on the prison narrative of our two heroes.

Aleksander Morgenbesser was a lawyer, a politician and a writer. Rafał Leszczyński, in his Foreword to Morgenbesser's *Memoires*, states that Julian Tuwim, probably the most well-known Polish poet of the period between the two World Wars, wanted to promote a revival of his works: «but his intentions lead to no result»<sup>4</sup>. Some of Morgenbesser oeuvres, such as the hero-comical poem *Obrona Sokołowa* (The Defence of Sokołów), written in prison, enjoyed a certain popularity and are now accessible also on line<sup>5</sup>; this notwithstanding, we can surely affirm that our writer belongs, at least by now, to the category of forgotten authors.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Morgenbesser, *Wspomnienia z lwowskiego więzienia*, red. by R. Leszczyński, Warszawa, Semper, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> J. Strykowski, *Czarna róża*, Warszawa, Czytelnik, 1962.

<sup>3</sup> R. Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Paris, Grasset 1961 (English version: *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> R. Leszczyński, *W stulecie zgonu Aleksandra Morgenbessera*, Foreword to: A. Morgenbesser, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> For instance see: <[http://merlin.pl/Obrona-Sokolowa\\_Aleksander-Morgenbesser/download/product/223,956268.html](http://merlin.pl/Obrona-Sokolowa_Aleksander-Morgenbesser/download/product/223,956268.html)>.

*Nomen atque omen*, used to say the Romans. Probably in all cultures the person's name, hiding secret forces, has a particular weight; the name is apt to change the world's destiny – and for sure the destiny of its carrier. (Namely Julian Strykowski, in the Polish literature, devoted a great attention to this item; one of his short novels collection is entitled *Imię własne*, The Proper Name). A fervent Polish patriot, but with his life marked by an inappropriate family name, Morgenbesser devoted all his efforts trying to redeem the imaginary guilt perpetrated by his remote ancestors, to demonstrate being different from what he was. Or, better, from what people thought him to be: a German, an Austrian, or, even worse, a Jew. Among others, thought he was a German the President of the criminal court in Lemberg, that even trusted him a confidential role in the assemblage of political trials (all the information obtained in this way, were immediately communicated by Morgenbesser to his colleagues-conspirators<sup>6</sup>). Thought him to be Jewish, among others, local leaders of the Endecja party<sup>7</sup> that, in the period between the two World Wars, set themselves against the project of naming after Morgenbesser one of the narrow streets in his native town, thinking he was «one of the same old bankers or merchants of Mosaic faith»<sup>8</sup>.

Historians often assert that, in 19th century Galicia, the Jews always «explicitly allied themselves with the Poles and against the Ukrainians», while among the Ukrainians was rapidly spreading an always more radical anti-polonism<sup>9</sup> (moreover, Morgenbesser, writing in the Eighties, was well aware of the dramatic developments of national politics in the second half of the century). But even if Morgenbesser took a pride of aiming only toward the good of Poland, in his memoirs he can't strain himself from describing the Jews basing only on anti-Semitic stereotypes. At the same time, like other Polish authors of the same geographical area<sup>10</sup>, he gave voice to a powerful attraction towards the Ukrainians that, as he often repeats, nothing really differentiates from the Poles<sup>11</sup> and whose beautiful, nostalgic songs (the *dumy*), learned in prison forty years before, «still today, in my old age, I ruefully sing»<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> R. Leszczyński, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> From the initials of *Narodowa Demokracja*, National Democracy, a nationalist party strongly xenophobic and anti-Semitic, founded at the end of the 19th century by Roman Dmowski, life-long adversary of Piłsudski. In the period between the two World Wars, Endecja fought for the primacy in the Polish political panorama against Marshal Piłsudski's bloc.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> See J.P. Himka, *Dimensions of a Triangle: Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Austrian Galicia*, in: I. Bartal, A. Polonsky (reds.), *Focusing on Galicia: Jews, Poles and Ukrainians 1772-1918*, «Polin», vol. 12, 1999, pp. 34 sgg.

<sup>10</sup> For all the century is well alive the Renaissance myth of the oriental borders, the so called *kresy*, synthesized in the proverbial self definition of the humanist Stanisław Orzechowski: «*Gente Ruthenus, Nazione Polonus*». Such is for instance the cryptonym chosen by Julian Horoszkiewicz for his booklet, published in Lemberg in 1871, *Podstawa zgody w narodzie*, A Base for the Harmony of the State.

<sup>11</sup> Like, for instance, in this paragraph: «During the Holy Week in the office of the clerk they erected an altar and, at the light of the candles, priest were officiating: one in Latin, the other in Ruthenian [i.e. in Ukrainian, *N.d.A.*]: *and this was the only difference between us*»; A. Morgenbesser, *op. cit.*, p. 67, italics mine.

<sup>12</sup> Ivi, p. 59.

Virtually excluded, because of the loathed family name, from the triangle of Galician nationalities<sup>13</sup>, in his adoring desire of spiritual union with Polishness, Morgenbesser locates the Jews in the role of the antagonist, but gives the Ukrainians the one of the one of deuteragonist, of the assistant in the realisation of the loving desire. The prison's cell, where the writer spends four years, is then the place of the accomplishment of the mystic wedding. Fulfilled, overwhelmed by emotion, with these words he announces his entrance in prison: «Therefore I became a member of the Polish martyrs, I got the Polish baptise, and this was for me an enormous consolation, because loving Poland with all my heart, with all my soul and with all my strength, I was joyful to be allowed to suffer for Her»<sup>14</sup>.

The attraction exercised by the idea of Poland and by prison itself that, with Maria Janion, it is possible to define «vampire-like»<sup>15</sup>, is made clear by our author in the most unambiguous way. After the 1830-31 Insurrection he writes: «Our bards' oeuvres were circulating from one hand to the other, in the main in manuscripts; *the influence and the appeal they exercised was still greater*, because it was sufficient to possess one of them for the owner to be arrested and condemned to prison»<sup>16</sup>.

Moreover, it had been only in the years following the Insurrection that, according to Morgenbesser, «the true Polish society», took form; only then «we learnt to know our language and our history»<sup>17</sup>; but this not because of the diffusion of political ideals but, according to our author, only thanks to the idealization of Poland proposed by national bards: «if poetry would not bond herself to patriotism, nobody today would even know what is the “Polish question”»<sup>18</sup>.

Morgenbesser was arrested in November 1841. In his pages we found several descriptions of harassments, starvation, illnesses, dark and gloomy cells. Several paragraphs are devoted to one of the recurring, fundamental theme of prison literature, i.e. to coded, clandestine messages, to the alphabet composed knocking at the wall, and to all the other tricks used by convicts to undermine an order based mainly on the inability of people to communicate among them. We would miss instead, such as in Strykowski's novel, any hint of nostalgia for the world outside the prison's walls – as if to underline the self-sufficiency of prison's society. We would also miss the mystical,

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance: «The University of Lemberg was attended uniquely by patriots. The only exceptions were a few Germans. Besides them, if somebody would remain at the margins, he would be considered to be a spy. I was immersed in the spirit of Polishness and I felt an urgency to demonstrate it with my deeds that was insomuch stronger, as I had against me the prejudice, that was, my family name», *ivi*, p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> *Ivi*, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> The theory that Polish patriotism would often be close to craziness and self-destruction and that it has an evident kinship with vampirism is made clear by Janion in several texts, beginning at least with *Wobec zła*, In Front of Evil, published in 1989.

<sup>16</sup> A. Morgenbesser, *op. cit.*, p. 29. Italics mine.

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, p. 33.

consolatory experience that in Silvio Pellico's (also detainee by the Austrians) *My Prisons* has its most important and well-known literary example.

In the *Oxford History of Prison* W.B. Carnochan points to three basic emotive models of prison literature: consolation, indignation and hope of justice, respectively symbolized by Boethius, Oscar Wilde, Antonio Gramsci<sup>19</sup>. Of these sentiments, indignation is perhaps the only one we can find in Morgenbesser's *Memoirs*; nevertheless in these pages, in spite of the tragic situation of the author and of the other convicts, the mood is often light and amused. «God bless Youth! Even in the middle of the gloomiest bitterness, it was enough that a merry thought would creep in, and it would suddenly get hold of the whole being, it would elevate the soul to high spirits, it would bring to light explosions of tricks and jokes»<sup>20</sup>.

The farcical pomes he writes in prison would arouse the enthusiasm of his inmates that, heedless of possible chastisements, declaim them shouting at the window to the other detainees. Accepted and admired, at the same time protected by the same prison that oppresses him, Morgenbesser is not afraid to show the pleasure and the pride he gets from belonging to a small, coherent group: «Our wing formally became a kind of Carnival Society. We would *live*, in the full meaning of the word»<sup>21</sup>.

Much darker is the tale narrated by Julian Strykowski, built, maybe even more than other texts of same author, on a complicated «masks parade»<sup>22</sup>.

Henryk Jarosz is a small-town young man craving for literary success, that arrives in Lemberg in the half of the Thirties to enter University. Even if also the native village of Oporzec would not be described in sentimental terms<sup>23</sup>, the capital so long yearned for immediately appears him in all the sullen ugliness of a big industrial town, in the destitution of the suburbs, in its social relations marked by violence and deception. A subjective paralysis of feelings and inability of moving to action, joined to an objective lack of money, make Henryk fall in a chain of events always more

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<sup>19</sup> See W.B. Carnochan, *The Literature of Confinement*, in: Morris N., Rothman D.J. (reds.), *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practise of Punishment in Western Society*, New York-Oxford, Oxford UP, 1995, Kindle edition, pos. 7334.

<sup>20</sup> A. Morgenbesser, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>21</sup> Ivi, p. 63, italics in the original text.

<sup>22</sup> Definition by M. Sadowska in *Rasa przeklęta. O prozie Juliana Strykowskiego*, in: M. Hornung, M. Jędrzejczak, T. Korsak (red.), *Ciało pleć literatura. Prace ofiarowane Profesorowi Germanowi Ritzowi w pięćdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin*, Warszawa, Wiedza Powszechna, 2001, p. 385. Julian Strykowski (Stryj, 1909 – Warsaw, 1996), is considered to be one of the great Polish writers of the 20th century and an authoritative voice in the world canon of Jewish literature. Only in his last short story, *Milczenie*, Silence, published in 1993, he declared his painful homosexuality. A communist, he spend in prison in Lemberg the years 1935-36.

<sup>23</sup> But, on the contrary, claustrophobic: «Among well-known buildings, in the simultaneous presence of the dead and of the living, of the parents and of the foreigners, you can remain a child forever»; J. Strykowski, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

demeaning, where he finds himself surrounded by people and by environments of an upsetting ugliness. Finally, he finds a job as a sales representative for a right-wing tabloid, «Sprawiedliwość», Justice. In this guise he is sent to blackmail the Jewish owner of the factory «Laokoon», whose daughter Tamara, a communist, is in danger of being arrested. Received by the manufacturer, before this one succeeds in throwing him out of his house, Henryk catches a glimpse of the beautiful, androgynous-looking girl, whose biblical name evokes morbid events<sup>24</sup>, and falls madly in love with her. The *amour fou* for the dogmatic Tamara, called by her lover *Black Rose*, makes him become a communist himself, and leads him shortly to spend two years in prison. To the description of this period is devoted the main part of the novel. But Henryk's social vocation appears to be in reality devoid of any inner justifications; the young man is described as an arid, shrunken person, bereft of human interest and pity for the people surrounding him. Finally out of prison, he learns that Tamara fled in the Soviet Union, disrupts any contact with his comrades and tries, committing a kind of deferred suicide, to join her crossing illegally the border.

Strykowski's *casus* is well known. His novels hide always a clue, generally very well hidden and concealed by the author himself, even in his numerous interviews and confessions. All his work appears indeed to be a perfect illustration of German Ritz's statement on the inexpressibility of desire: «Thanks to its paradoxical strength, the inexpressible transform itself in the principle that organizes the whole text, in the semantic cornerstone of narrative poetics»<sup>25</sup>.

Unrequited love, the fascination for communism, the realistic and pitiless description of the cruelty of social relations in the last years of the Second Polish Republic, the brutality of prison: this all form the first level of narration, a narration that, as same Strykowski repeated, has its real clue, from one side, in the romantic tradition, from the other in the myth of Orpheus. While the last theme is clearly explicated by one of the characters (Henryk, like Orpheus, wants to join Tamara in Hades – just a pity that, in this case, Euridyce does not want to have anything in common with her presumed savior, towards whom she feels a complete indifference, if not despise), the references to Romanticism are more hidden. As already mentioned, Strykowski laid a great stress on the meaning of his characters' names. Henryk – Heinrich – is, in the German literature well known to the author, the Romantic name par excellence<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, the characters of *Black Rose* would be, according to the author, shaped on those of the romantic masterpiece *The Un-Divine Comedy* by

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<sup>24</sup> See Genesis 38, and Samuel 2, 13.

<sup>25</sup> G. Ritz, *Niewypowiedziane pożądanie a poetyka narracji*, «Teksty Drugie», n. 3, 1997, p. 46; quoted by M. Sadowska, *op. cit.*, p. 389.

<sup>26</sup> But the family name Jarosz, “vegetarian”, could possibly indicate a person that willingly deprives himself of something necessary.

Zygmunt Krasiński<sup>27</sup>. In the novel we can in reality find some *topoi* that are typical also for this literary current, such as: multiple identities; the attraction for the criminal side of existence; a destructive and irrational passion and, of course, the prison, seen as a place of unutterable sufferance but, at the same time, as a protective and maternal shelter. In a more complex and deep manner than Morgenbesser's *Memoires*, Strykowski's novel seems well to be first of all shaped on the structure of triangular desire, such as described by Renè Girard, whose aim is «“transfigurer” l'objet»<sup>28</sup>. Strykowski indeed “transfigures” each character of his narration, and above all his own *alter ego*, with whom he shares a series of autobiographic information, enough to allow an immediate identification, but who, unlike the author self, is handsome, tall, Aryan, catholic (and heterosexual).

Flaubert's heroes, in de Gaultier's well-known essay on Bovaryism quoted by Girard, «pour se concevoir autres qu'ils ne sont», set themselves a model and «imitent du personnage qui ils ont résolu d'être tout ce qu'il est possible d'imiter, tout l'extérieur, toute l'apparence, le geste, l'intonation, l'habit»<sup>29</sup>. A truly bovarian character, a *vain person* as meant by Stendhal, the hero of *Black Rose* does not only imitate Tamara: he apes her desire (which is a dogmatic communism), makes it his own, and continuously tries to surpass his model in its observance.

If Tamara is Henryk's mirror image, it is then not surprising that, at the news of her arrest – and of the following impossibility of continuing to imitate her – Henryk gets into panic.

Information regarding the prison were disseminated already in the first pages of the novel, when nothing would yet point at Henryk's future communist calling. Why so afraid of prison, cries out in two different passages of the novel the communist worker Józef: «Also prison is made for human beings!»<sup>30</sup>. At the beginning of *Black Rose* we find moreover the description of two young Ukrainians led to prison, both handcuffed, one audacious, the other bashful, shamelessly exposed to «the eyes of the street»; immediately after, the apparently incidental image of groups of secondary-school students starrng and blatantly commenting the girls passing by.<sup>31</sup> The episodes, apparently not worth mentioning, make themselves conspicuous seen under the erotic point of view of young, defenseless bodies (the handcuffed Ukrainians and the young girls share the same impossibility of rebellion), shown to the sight of the crowd, and in the implicit promise of intimacy, of physical

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<sup>27</sup> Zygmunt Krasiński (1812-1859) belongs, with Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, to the triad of Polish romantic bards. His masterpiece, the drama *The Un-Divine Comedy*, published in 1835 (and whose main character is the Count Henryk), deals with social dynamics and on the mechanisms of revolution, and it is considered to be a cornerstone of modern anti-Semitism. Strykowski was used to choose as his literary models overtly anti-Semitic writers, such as Louis-Ferdinand Céline, whose *Death on Credit* he translated into Polish.

<sup>28</sup> R. Girard, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> J. Strykowski, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> Ivi, pp. 62-63. Like in other novels by Strykowski, also *Black Rose* is interwoven with allusions – non-allusion to the sexual identity of the main hero, alter ego of the writer. Such as when Jarosz looks at himself in a mirror and «begins to sing: “Little woman, don't ‘you know? Even the mirror will lie to you”», ivi, p. 143.

promiscuity, imposed by the prison. After Tamara's arrest, to join her in prison shortly becomes Henryk's main goal in life, and he rapidly succeeds in achieving it.

The descriptions of everyday prison life are, in these pages, much more brutal than Morgenbesser's, and it is difficult to imagine Henryk Jarosz stating that, closed in his cell, he had been *living*. Prison authorities are driven by an unreserved violence; violent, gloomily dogmatic, shaped in a continuous atmosphere of suspect are also the relations between the inmates. But the closeness, the frequent nudity of convicts' bodies, the recurrent, also physical, humiliations to whom they are exposed, all this forms an erotic atmosphere that, even if it does not replace an ambience of enclosing acceptance, it's enough to be its at least temporary substitute. Henryk is just arrived in prison, when he makes even an attempt to reveal himself. When the handsome comrade Tyszyk asks him which will be his surname for the "prison's commune", Henryk answers bashful: «Rose».

As pointed by Grażyna Borkowska, Strykowski hints only with a huge circumspection to his own homoerotic experiences, that are generally betrayed only by the description of attractive-looking partners<sup>32</sup>. Among the many male characters of the novel, is the above mentioned Tyszyk, to whom the reason for Henryk's arrest is strangely bound, the one to emerge in a more lively way. Tyszyk is a sturdy Ukrainian worker that loves singing folkloric and soviet songs with his beautiful bass voice. But Tyszyk is nobody else than Tadeusz Karpiński<sup>33</sup>, a Polish nobleman that repudiated his father's heritage. The fatal Galician triangle is thus well drawn: an autobiographical hero who is a Pole and a Catholic, but in fact a Jew; an object of desire who is a Jewish girl, but does in reality exist only in her function of mediation, of the person who supplies the model of desire to be emulated; an Ukrainian deuteragonist, that hides identity riddles, whose solution remains to us unknown.

Maybe easier to find is instead the key to the contradictions of Henryk's thought and behavior (and here is not important to label which one are, or not, shared with the person of the author). The lack of feelings, the doll's face<sup>34</sup>, the frequent mention of mirrors and the maniacal obsession with an unreal object of desire: this all causes that Henryk does not look like an emulous of Orpheus, but as the illustration of another Greek myth, more multifaceted and more destructive: the myth of Narcissus.

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<sup>32</sup> G. Borkowska, *The Homelessness of the Other. The Homoerotic Experience in the Prose of Julian Strykowski*, in B. Shallcross (red.), *Framing the Polish Home. Post-war Cultural Constructions of Hearth, Nation, and Self*, Athens, Ohio UP, 2002, p. 62

<sup>33</sup> J. Strykowski, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, See p. 174

The essence of narcissism, for many aspects similar to the triangular mediation of desire, lays essentially in the incapacity of expressing oneself, in the denial of one's identity<sup>35</sup>. The prison, where the narcissistic ego is closed, could look similar to a concrete prison, composed of thresholds, doors, walls, and rare windows. But the threshold of prison, at least in theory, is built to be crossed: in prison people go in, from prison people go out. But our authors' coming out from prison – with whom both narrations end –, do transform this threshold in a virtually unending boundary, in a border towards the unknown. The "rite of passage" offered by the prison does not prelude here to a return in the bosom of one's community, nor to a deeper awareness, nor to a kind of transcendence<sup>36</sup>, but only to a definitive exile. In Morgenbesser this is due to an adverse destiny, against whom it seems impossible to fight; in Strykowski to a conscious and intentional choice, that he does willfully pursue. At the end of his *Memoirs*, in spite of the masochistic «baptize to Polishness», Morgenbesser will find himself from this Polishness ever more far away than before. His narration closes with the following words: «Notwithstanding the regained freedom, the effects of that sentence were deeply painful, because it made us all civil dead [...]. Being destitute of any properties, I was compelled to grab the pilgrim's staff and go abroad to earn my bread, and the Angel of Fate slammed behind me the door of my fatherland. For ever!»<sup>37</sup>.

The hero of *Black Rose*, only just out of prison, breaking every Party's discipline, crosses alone the border with the Soviet Union, in the illusion of joining the idealized Tamara and of dissolving himself in a limitless vastness. The novel ends with an image of desperate void: «"Ščastlyvoj dorohy", Have a good journey, repeated the old man in Ukrainian. But Henryk was not hearing him any longer, his eyes full of tears stared the black empty space»<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> See A. Lowen, *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self*, Pennsylvania, Collier Books, 1984.

<sup>36</sup> See *Carceral Topography: Spatiality, Liminality and Corporality in the Literary Prison*, «Textual Practice», n. 13, 1, 1999, pp. 43-77, <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/51503648/FLUDERNIK-Monika-Carceral-Topography-Spatiality-Liminality-and-Corporality-in-the-Literary-Prison>>, p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> A. Morgenbesser, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>38</sup> J. Strykowski, *op. cit.*, p. 504.